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SUBJECT: MOROCCO: MINISTERIAL CHANGES SHORE UP THE  
GOVERNMENT

REF: RABAT 0497

1. (SBU) Summary: On July 29, Morocco's King Mohammed VI approved the appointments of new ministers: a second Minister of State without portfolio, a Minister of Culture, a Minister of Youth and Sports, and a Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs. The Minister of State and Secretary of State appointments were probably given to the Popular Movement (MP) Party in exchange for its agreeing to join the ruling coalition. While the MP is a small party on the Moroccan political landscape, the move shored up the government's tenuous hold on power by restoring a majority coalition, which was lost when the Party of Authenticity and Modernity (PAM) withdrew from the government shortly before the nationwide municipal elections held on June 12. The MP's move into government appears to be an effort to ameliorate the party's political troubles; at the same time it likely guarantees stability of the current government until the 2012 legislative elections. End Summary.

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Government Shakeup  
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2. (SBU) In a small but significant shakeup in the ruling government coalition, Morocco's King Mohammed VI on July 29 appointed a new Minister of State, a new Minister of Culture, a new Minister of Youth and Sports, and a new Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs. MP Secretary General Mohand Laenser assumed the position of Minister of State. (Note: The senior Minister of State position is held by Mohamed El Yazghi from the Socialist Union of Popular Forces Party or USFP. End Note.) Senior MP member Mohamed Ouzzine became Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, a post that has been vacant since the dismissal of Istiqlal's Ahmed Lakhri in December 2008. Bensalem Himmich, from USFP, was appointed Minister of Culture replacing Touriya Jabrane, from the same party, who stepped down for health reasons. Moncef Belkhatat from the National Rally of Independents (RNI), a government coalition partner, replaced Nawal El Moutawakil, also from RNI, as the Minister for Youth and Sports. During a meeting on August 12 with Belkhatat, who has a reputation as a "no-nonsense" manager, Charge learned that Moutawakil had been replaced because of her growing obligations as a member of the International Olympic Committee and Moroccan sports team, a poor record during her tenure.

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Weakened Government Majority Precipitates Changes  
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3. (SBU) The Minister of State and Secretary of State appointments were the reward for the MP's entry into the ruling coalition. The ministerial reshuffle had been expected after the PAM surprised its allies by abruptly

withdrawing its support from the government and officially joining the parliamentary opposition in the run-up to the June 12 local elections. The move created a de facto balance between the ruling coalition and opposition in the lower house. PAM's withdrawal was widely interpreted as an effort to position itself as a "political outsider" in the recent elections (reftel).

¶4. (SBU) Although a shock to the ruling coalition, PAM's shift took place during the summer recess, giving the government time to form another coalition before the October parliamentary session, when it needs a majority to pass the critical budget bill. King Mohammed VI ensured survival of the government by expressing his confidence in Prime Minister Abbas El Fassi in a telephone call that was publicly disclosed the day after PAM's move. The MP brought 70 parliamentary seats into government -- approximately 40 in the Chamber of Representatives (the parliament's lower house) and 30 in the Chamber of Councilors (upper house), restoring the government's parliamentary majority with more than 200 members in the more important 325-seat lower house.

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Internal Problems Prompts MP Move into Government  
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¶5. (SBU) On August 12, 2009, MP Executive Member Lahcen Haddad told Acting PolCouns and D/PolCouns that internal problems hurt the MP in recent elections. He described internal divisions, a growing "Anti-Palace" perception, and an apparent loss of interest in Berber-related issues among younger voters among the concerns that prompted the MP to seek "harbor in the storm" by joining the government. In

local elections on June 12, the MP garnered approximately eight percent of the vote, down from 15 percent in the previous communal elections in 2003.

¶6. (SBU) Internal divisions within the MP, precipitated by the absorption of two other Berber-oriented parties in 2006, had created paralysis within the party. According to Haddad, instead of a catalyst effect, the merger left the party divided. He said that MP Party Secretary Mohand Laenser had chosen a laissez-faire approach to the internal rivalries, perpetuating the problem. The appointment to ministerial posts of Laenser and Ouzzine, both of whom are from the same MP faction, and the concomitant fact that at least one of the ministerial posts was not allocated to another faction, were symptomatic of the problem. Growth of the party (in targeted constituencies such as labor unions and university professors) had been stunted by the internal rivalries, according to Haddad, because each of three factions were more concerned that its rivals would benefit more for the growth than itself.

¶7. (SBU) The MP, normally considered a "pro-Palace party," as reflected by its traditional participation in government, had also been hurt by its recent stint in the opposition. Two years ago, the MP was relegated to the opposition as a result of a disagreement over the distribution of ministerial portfolios following the 2007 legislative elections. According to Haddad, MP party leaders had little to offer party members and constituents in terms of political largesse while in opposition, which further complicated MP's internal dynamics.

¶8. (SBU) Haddad added that many Moroccans of the younger generation no longer identify with the issues that had given rise in the past to the established political parties like Istiqlal, USFP, and MP. The MP has always been seen as a party advocating on behalf of Morocco's Berber (Amazigh) population, resisting the government's traditional "Arabization" policies and supporting the preservation of Amazigh cultural and linguistic identity. Government accommodation of these concerns in recent years may have diminished their political urgency. Haddad said that part of the appeal of PAM was that, unlike the MP, it did not have a lot of the "historical baggage," adding that the MP had

suffered a disproportionate number of defectors to the PAM in the run up to the municipal elections.

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MP Seeks Resuscitation in Government  
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¶9. (SBU) Given these internal troubles, MP leaders considered joining the government to be the most expedient way to stop the party's decline. Haddad considers the current leadership of the MP to be weak and prone to the old reflexes of "being told what to do by the Palace," and to the desire to return the party to its traditional role as "friend to the King." He also considered the two posts that the MP received for joining the government to be "empty shells," with no tangible benefit to the party, saying the posts are powerless, with no influence on government decision-making or contact with constituents. The MP may have felt pressure to accept less-than-favorable ministerial posts because the government probably would have asked another small party, the Constitutional Union Party (UC), with its 27 deputies, to join the government if the MP had tried to bargain harder for better posts. Rumors that the government was at least exploring a dialogue on this score with the UC were confirmed by other Embassy contacts.

¶10. (SBU) Comment: Optimists liken the MP's new position in the Moroccan political spectrum to be similar to the "kingmaker" role played by the Liberal Free Democratic Party (FDP) in Germany, whereby a small party garners disproportionate political power because larger parties cannot form a majority without it. Nonetheless, the MP continues to remain divided and increasingly unpopular. Instead of making tough choices to consolidate and share power within its ranks, the MP appears to have chosen the easier route of joining the government. The MP's acceptance of the two moribund posts reflects the party's desperation in this regard. While the MP remains troubled, its entry into government has certainly bolstered the ruling coalition, virtually guaranteeing that this government will survive into the 2012 elections, barring the unlikely defection of another coalition partner. End Comment.

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